

THE STEPMOTHER

BY KATHERINE METCALF ROOF

Author of "A Lighted House"

I

CIRCUMSTANCES had so ordered Mildred Tremain's life that the experience of falling in love at what is usually conceived to be the susceptible age had been denied her. She had had other interesting, if more impersonal, experiences. In her nomad life on the Continent with her invalid father she had observed, thought, enjoyed, and had arrived at that expensive stage of development where her pleasures, if more completely realized, were rendered less in number by the process of discrimination and elimination. The chances of her falling in love at all had therefore become reduced as the likelihood of her finding an adequate object became less. Yet the miracle happened, after all, in her late twenties. In Gilbert Fleming she found a being apparently designed to meet every side of her rather complex nature.

Too essentially tactful to arouse antagonism, Mildred Tremain was admirably adapted to a companionable human existence. She was artistic in her appreciations, yet content to enjoy the fruits of art instead of mistaking her appreciation for creative talent and joining the army of dilettante amateurs and imitative producers.

Although Gilbert Fleming had given her her first experience in love, she felt no pang in the realization that, aside from those more or less superficial affairs that most men over thirty have had, Fleming himself had had the far more tangible and penetrating experience of matrimony. He had been married for nearly three years to a woman he had loved, and they had had one child, a boy whom Mildred had not seen before her engagement. That first love and marriage, she decided in her innermost communion with herself, could

not have contained such complete understanding as existed between Gilbert and herself. She had seen Amy's picture—an intense, delicate face with a high forehead and great eyes, a serious concentrated face. Amy had been a "college woman," one, Mildred felt, with a life dedicated to progressive movements and ideals and, she was convinced, with no sense of humor. She wondered sometimes how companionable Gilbert had found her—Gilbert with his gay, whimsical point of view, his sensitive, cultivated American mind, which met all discomforts, as well as deeper troubles, with a light, courageous philosophy. Yet she felt not the faintest pang of jealousy toward the dead wife or toward the child, to whom Fleming was unselfishly devoted.

Mildred was not a woman possessed of a wide and overflowing maternal instinct. That is to say, her heart did not go out toward every child she saw simply because it was a child. It is possible that she would not have suffered deeply if denied the experience of motherhood. At the same time she was far from being devoid of maternal instinct. She took children upon the same basis of selection as grown people, liking some, finding others unsympathetic; but her heart had gone out in advance to Fleming's son. She felt stirred at the thought of him. She hoped he was like Gilbert. She had seen a picture of him taken two years before,—he was six now,—a beautiful boy with a mass of curls and large eyes, a picturesque child of a type that lent itself to the photographer's art.

It happened that it was a bare month before the wedding when she first saw Arthur. His father, intensely alive to the significance of the meeting, brought him.

It was not surprising that the child should shrink from a stranger, Mildred reminded herself afterward; she had prepared herself beforehand for such a possibility. But Arthur had been too young when his mother died to remember her, and his grandmother, far from consciously or unconsciously seeking to prejudice him against his new mother, was sincerely pleased with Gilbert's choice. Yes, it was natural enough, yet something in the way the child turned his shoulder, in his fretful, inarticulate sound of repulse, gave a chill to Mildred. Wisely, she did not attempt effusive overtures.

"I believe in letting children alone when they are shy, instead of trying to force their interest," she said to Gilbert, who agreed as he passed his hands lovingly over the child's curls.

"He is a little out of sorts to-day. He is n't like himself," he apologized. The meeting was not quite as he had imagined it.

Arthur climbed up into his father's lap and regarded Mildred frowningly over his shoulder a minute, then buried his face in Fleming's arm.

"He does n't look like you." Mildred had searched the child's features in vain for any resemblance to Gilbert's strong, keen, responsive face.

Arthur, whimpering, began to try to attract his father's attention. "You must n't interrupt, dear," Fleming reproved him gently; but Arthur continued to keep up a fretful undertone of protest while they talked. In a way, he was a beautiful boy, Mildred reflected, observing the child without letting him become aware of it. Yet somehow the impression left her let down, chilled. There was something about Arthur's face—the large, cold, dark eyes, the long upper lip; the relaxed mouth, which dropped at the corners and was seldom closed—that was not pleasing. She caught the thought back half formulated. She would love Gilbert's child, of course, and he would love her; she would win his love.

II

A FEW days after they had returned from their honeymoon, and were settled in their new house on the Sound, Arthur was brought home by his grandmother. It was natural, Mildred told herself again, that

the child should cling to his grandmother, natural that he should cry in parting with her. She reproached herself for the reflection that Arthur's roars—of unexpected volume, for his speaking voice was low—seemed more suggestive of anger than of sorrow.

She set herself to work unobtrusively to win the little boy's love. She gave him books and toys, she read to him, she told him stories. He accepted these attentions impersonally, listening solemnly. He was an intelligent child with an excellent memory. She took him into town to the hippodrome, but he was afraid of the animals, and cried to be taken home. All attempts to amuse him that met with his approval he accepted; personal demonstration of any kind he instantly rejected. For the first time in her life Mildred worked to please, and without success. Arthur continued literally and figuratively to turn a cold shoulder upon her advances. He continued to regard her attempts with somber eyes and the relaxed lips that seemed to be part of his unfriendly stare. With his father he was always demonstrative, demanding of him his undivided attention. The moment Gilbert's interest was centered upon Mildred, Arthur would begin to whimper and pull at his hand. Indeed, the second day after the stepson's arrival, Mildred realized that he was jealous of his father's affection for her and that, child as he was, his interruptions to their conversations were intentional. Well, that was natural, too. She fought back any lack of sympathy in herself, willing to be patient; but Arthur did not become reconciled to the situation. Any demonstration between herself and her husband in his presence produced such a tempest of tears that it was abandoned by tacit consent. Gilbert, however, was disposed to take the child's attitude lightly.

"Poor little chap!" he exclaimed with a tender amusement. "I really believe he is jealous, he has always had me so absolutely to himself. We must deal gently with him. It will wear away in time."

And Mildred assented, smiling sympathetically. Indeed, she did not at this time admit her doubts to herself. But Arthur's feeling did not wear away, and at the end of four months Mildred was forced to admit that she had made no progress in his affections.

Arthur had a nurse over whom he tyrannized, ruling her by persistent fretting and by what Mildred could not but believe to be an organized system of tears, so that there was little real necessity for Mildred to deal with him. Yet all her attempts to assume little duties that the nurse or grandmother had performed for the motherless child were resisted by him. Gilbert, coming home late in the afternoon after Arthur's supper-time, remained unaware of the true nature of the situation. The hour before the child's bedtime he gave up to him, as his custom had been since the death of Arthur's mother. The intensity of his devotion to his son was obvious. Mildred felt no pang in this, neither did the relation between herself and Arthur in any way connect itself in her mind with Arthur's mother. The thing that was beginning to trouble her was her feeling toward the child himself.

Aside from his obvious unfriendliness toward her, Arthur was everything that she did not like in a child. She had tried in vain to find anything lovable about him. He was perfectly healthy, but he was cowardly. He was afraid of almost everything. If a dog came toward him with friendly wagging tail, he would run with his fretful cry to his nurse or father. She had given up her beloved little Boston bull on Arthur's account. Barkis, who was almost maudlin in his devotion to children, had persisted in his attentions to Arthur at their first introduction, and the child had stood clinging to his nurse, bawling—Mildred felt that no other word was adequate—with rage and terror. When Barkis, undiscouraged, had planted persuasive paws upon the boy's knickerbockers, Arthur, nerved to action in his panic, had struck out at him with a stick. Arthur was fond of carrying large sticks, which he would brandish to the danger of neighboring eyes. Barkis, bewildered, his doggish feelings as well as his humorous features wounded by the child's blows, had trotted off, and Mildred had sent him to a cousin who had long coveted him.

She tried to dwell upon the child's good points,—his affection for his father, his intelligence,—yet even in that there seemed a suspicion of the prig. She reminded herself that he was a truthful

child despite his timidity, and that was much. She must not let herself dislike him. It was serious enough that the child disliked her, and of that fact there was no longer any room for doubt. With that sense of shock with which we discover in young children characteristics that are associated in our minds with maturity, she began to realize the workings of an unmistakable malice in Arthur.

"You can't send a ball *half* as far as Aunt Eva can," he observed to Mildred at a golf game that he was permitted to follow. Such remarks were frequently upon his lips. When his aunt's excitable little fox terrier—viewed calmly by Arthur from the security of the motor—refused to come at Mildred's call, Arthur's face was radiant. "Dick does n't like you," he exclaimed gleefully.

Yet, fortunately, Mildred felt, Gilbert did not realize any serious significance in these things. To him Arthur's vagaries remained the idiosyncrasies of a beloved child.

One day Mildred sat watching Arthur as he played intently with a train of cars on the veranda, his loose mouth open. She observed that the child's habit, which, while it irritated her, she would not have ventured to correct, was due to a relaxation of the jaw rather than to the artless trick of early childhood. It had an unpleasant suggestion of weakness of character; yet, she reflected, Arthur was peculiarly persistent. At that moment he raised his eyes and glanced in her direction, his forehead—his mother's intellectual forehead—for the moment uncovered by his picturesque curls. Something shot through her sharply. She covered her face with her hands. Was it possible that she disliked Gilbert's child! It seemed an enormity to feel that way toward any child, most of all one bound to her by such a tie, the son of the man she loved.

Yes, it was true; but she must overcome it, for it was inescapable. Arthur would be a problem in her life for many years to come. It would be nine years at least before Gilbert would be willing to send him off to school. As she sat there thinking deeply, Gilbert himself came up and sat down beside her. Arthur paused in his play and ran up, claiming his father's knee. A servant came out on the porch, taking Mildred's attention for the mo-

ment. As she stood there beside her husband and his child, determined to resist her impulse of antagonism, she dropped her hand upon Arthur's curls; but he shook it off, frowning.

"Why, Arthur!" exclaimed Gilbert. "What is the matter! Apologize at once to your mother, and tell her you are sorry."

"I won't. I'm not sorry," Arthur whimpered, beginning to cry.

With a grave face his father put him down and told him to go off and play by himself. Arthur remained immovable. "Arthur, did you hear me?"

Still Arthur did not obey.

"Arthur!" Gilbert's voice became stern. Arthur stared a moment in shocked unbelief; it was the first time he had heard such a tone from his father. Then very slowly he turned and began to walk away, his voice rising in a crescendo of sobs. Gilbert turned to his wife. Their eyes met.

"I am afraid he does n't feel quite at home with me yet," she said.

Gilbert's face was troubled. "He is a peculiar child. A little difficult at first, perhaps; but once you have him, he is yours." How far Gilbert was from understanding! She smiled. "You may have to work a little to win him," he concluded.

It was not a reproach. It may have been the irony of the suggestion or merely that the tension of her nerves had reached the cumulative point; but she made the confession she had never intended to make to him.

"I have tried, but I seem to have failed."

"Surely any woman can win the love of a little child, a baby!"

She turned and met his eyes again, and in that moment realized that it would be impossible for him to hold the child in any way responsible. For the first time since she had known him his expression seemed unsympathetic. For the first time it struck through her sharply, agonizingly that Gilbert's child might come between them.

One day toward spring Mildred and Gilbert, starting for a week-end, left Arthur screaming in the arms of his nurse. Gilbert listened with a worried face to the diminishing of cries as they drove away.

"I don't know what's come over Arthur. He can't be well," he said.

"I am afraid he has been a little bit spoiled," Mildred replied, and the next minute she was sorry for the speech.

"Possibly I have spoiled him, the little chap being left motherless so young. I must watch myself about that." Gilbert was plainly disturbed, and Mildred hastened to reassure him.

When they returned Monday, Arthur was pale and heavy-eyed. He had cried incessantly, his nurse said. Mildred coaxed him, picture-book in hand, and even tried to lift him up into her lap, a familiarity she had ventured upon only once before. But Arthur, wriggling violently from her clasp, burst again into noisy tears. His father, entering the room in time to see the whole episode, reproved him severely. Arthur, his sob caught halfway, stared a moment, then his tears broke out again with renewed violence. Gilbert, with a set face, carried him wailing dismally from the room and left him in solitary confinement in the nursery. But at tea-time the nurse came down with an anxious face.

"Please, sir, could you come up and see Master Arthur? He seems to have a fever."

Gilbert hurried up the stairs, to find his son tossing about with flushed cheeks. That night Arthur developed croup. The nurse was in a panic. The croup kettle was mislaid. She could not put her hands on the usual nursery remedies. She completely lost her head. Mildred moved noiselessly about, filling hot water bottles, making poultices. Unfamiliar with the geography of the nursery, she quickly discovered oil for rubbing, and all the other necessary paraphernalia of this distressing seizure of childhood. Gilbert sat beside the crib, the child's hand in his, his anxious eyes never leaving the boy's flushed face; and Mildred, watching him, realized as she never had before what his son was to him.

She felt in some vague way responsible. She wondered if Arthur was not one of those people who have that mysterious faculty of putting others in the wrong. She apprehended without personal bias that his mother had been like that—not a woman who nagged or criticized, but one whose very presence was a reproach to the shortcomings of others. Of course Arthur had not made himself ill on purpose, although

his continued crying had undoubtedly been the cause. Why was it that the whole thing seemed to her like the behavior of a hysterical woman? She must not let herself think such thoughts. She must guard herself against any possibility of being unjust to Gilbert's child. The shadow that she now fearfully glimpsed upon their clear horizon must not come nearer, wax larger.

She approached the bedside, poultice in hand. Arthur moved to push it away with feeble protest. "It won't hurt, dear; it will make you well," Gilbert explained with anxious tenderness.

"Papa! Papa!" Arthur attempted to indicate his wishes, but words and gesture were broken into by the dread wheezing cough.

Gilbert whitened. "We must have the doctor. He can hardly breathe."

"Meantime he must have this on." Mildred spoke quietly.

Gilbert's worried gaze went to the shapeless steaming mass in his wife's hand. "Dear little chap! he wants me to do everything for him. Perhaps—" But Mildred took the helm with the firmness of woman exercising her natural function. "I think I can do it better. We can't consider his preferences just now."

"Of course not." Gilbert held the writhing, coughing child while Mildred deftly placed the poultice.

The operation over, she stood at the foot of the bed apart from them, watching them. To Gilbert his son's wilfulness had been only the natural pettishness of a sick child; but Mildred knew. Suddenly the thing pierced her like a red-hot iron and left her shivering.

Had the cloud sent out a lightning flash, illuminating the darkest recesses of her soul? No, no, it was not that, not a wish, she assured herself passionately, an irresponsible thing from without, not born of her own feeling. It was the last thing she would have happen. A glance at her husband's face calmed her with the consciousness of her right feeling. She wished only for Gilbert's happiness. She would be incapable of wishing anything that could hurt him ever so little, least of all such a terrible thing as that loss would be to him. It was dreadful that such visions could come to one, that such a thought un-

bidden could enter the mind. She moved softly toward the door.

Gilbert glanced up. "Where are you going?"

"To telephone the doctor."

"He seems easier now. Perhaps it is n't necessary."

"Best to be on the safe side."

He heard her light step going down the stairs and later the half-audible sound of her voice at the telephone. He drew a long sigh of relief and thankfulness. What a comfort to have a woman like that in one's home! How devoted she had been to his child!

III

THE Saturday following Arthur's attack of croup they had planned a sail to an island some distance up the Sound. It was the half-yearly celebration of their wedding, and they had promised themselves an entire Saturday and Sunday together, free from social obligations.

The day was perfect, and they made enthusiastic plans at breakfast, a meal at which Arthur was not present. Mildred had often reflected with satisfaction that it would be at least two years before Gilbert would expect to have the child with them for luncheon and breakfast, while the time for including him in the evening meal was agreeably remote.

On the veranda, however, they were immediately joined by Arthur. Although he did not know of the intended excursion, his intuition, curiously quick in such matters, divined the situation from the first allusion.

"Papa, take me," he pleaded.

Gilbert glanced at Mildred, then back at the child, whose face had grown intense. "Why, I don't know, old man—do you want to go so much?"

He received no clue from Mildred's face, and was obliged to ask, "How about it, dear?"

She turned an instant. Yet civilized, disciplined as she was, he divined a reservation in her face. After all, Arthur was not her child, he reflected. "You would rather not, perhaps?" his tone was still that of question.

"Just as you feel about it." Her voice was even; only a corner of her face was visible.

Prompted by an anxious pull at his

hand, Gilbert looked down again into the child's eager eyes. "It would be awfully jolly, the three of us, if you see it that way." She noted the wistfulness in his tone, but her answer came an instant late. "Of course I want anything that will add to your pleasure."

Gilbert's face fell. "You would rather not have him," he said.

She gripped her courage in both hands. She was aware of Arthur's large, cold eyes, hostile, apprehensive, but she smiled. "On the contrary, I should rather have him." He wanted to be convinced,—dear old Gilbert!—she saw that. She added emphasis, gave commands theatrically gay, to hurry the preparations, and so with a buoyancy not altogether artificial bore down his perfunctory objections.

But, alas! after all, the day was not a success! Arthur, making insistent, restless demands upon their attention, was not happy. Gilbert was worried with an imperfect sense of some lack of harmony. Arthur was afraid of the water, and cried when a big wave slapped the boat; to crown all, he was seasick, and in time even Mildred's courageous efforts to create the illusion of a joyous holiday were useless.

The little party walked in a subdued mood from the boat-landing to the waiting motor; Gilbert, at Arthur's request, carried the child, whose tear-wet lashes went to the father's heart.

"I am afraid it has spoiled your day," Gilbert said slowly. In planning it, he had called it "our day," Mildred recalled; then she was ashamed of her trivial introspectiveness.

"No, indeed," she assured him quickly. "And it would have spoiled yours if we had left him." The last words slipped out unintentionally.

Gilbert glanced at her, and in his turn made denial.

"I mean you enjoy things more when he is included," Mildred replied. She had not intended the formal coloring that she realized in her tone after she had spoken.

"I do, of course," Gilbert's tone also was not natural. "And it always seems a pity to deny a child the little things that give him pleasure."

"I think so, too," Mildred agreed generously.

"Only we must manage so that his

pleasure is not at the expense of yours," he concluded gently, yet gravely.

Mildred was essentially tactful, yet at that moment her effort to preserve impersonal ground and avoid the wounding did not prove healing. "It is only too bad that Arthur is afraid of the water, so that he did n't enjoy it."

Gilbert had been a champion in athletics in his college days, and his face fell. "The child has been too much with women," he said. "He must play more with boys."

She forbore to remind him that Arthur did not like to play with boys, but preferred little girls, over whom he domineered exultingly. "He will grow up soon enough." It was not like Mildred to resort to formula. Fortunately at that moment they reached the motor. They made the swift journey home in a silence not unusual after an exhausting day's work in the pursuit of pleasure. Mildred was struggling against the conviction that what Arthur needed was an old-fashioned spanking, a thought that had occurred to her before. She glanced from time to time at Gilbert, aware of his preoccupation. Catching her eye once, he smiled. She had known that he was not unjust enough to misunderstand, but that he should understand was more than she could expect.

Before dinner he joined her on the veranda. She had put on his favorite pale violet muslin, but he did not comment upon the fact. She knew that he had just come from his bedtime talk with Arthur; but he did not arrive as usual with some amused, loving anecdote of the child. Instead, he remarked in an oppressed tone that he must "get at" certain long-delayed papers after dinner. Mildred's heart sank, but she smiled, commiserating him. "Poor old Gilbert! What a horrid way to spend your evening!" There must not be any sense of constraint between them about Arthur. She put the question at once, striving to exclude from her tone any suggestion of the perfunctory:

"Did Arthur seem tired after his day?"

"No, indeed, but—" He turned something less than his profile toward her—"it was a mistake to take him."

That statement, although punctiliously denied on her part, marked, she felt, the end of Gilbert's unconsciousness. So long as realization lay with her alone, their har-

mony was not threatened. Now it lay naked, admitted, between them, the discordant, irreconcilable element.

So it had come at last, the edge of the shadow had touched her.

IV

THE shadow did not deepen, neither did it advance, but it remained definitely threatening upon the outskirts of their consciousness. They had in effect accepted a ground upon which they could not meet. In Arthur's presence they were self-conscious. In referring to the boy, Gilbert's manner became tinged with an unintentional formality. His small requests concerning the child's welfare were invariably accompanied by such phrases as, "If you will be so kind," "If it is not too much trouble." And Mildred, after her first hurried protestations denying the implication of effort, accepted the significant formula, replying in kind. There were moments when it seemed to have made no difference in their relation, yet, she felt, there was a difference.

It was a week or ten days after the sail, when the courteous formality had become a habit, that Gilbert's sister sailed for Europe. They had planned to go into town to see her off. Eva was one of those who highly value such attentions. She not only successfully maintained a large correspondence, but kept a record of friends' birthdays, which she celebrated by the writing of congratulatory letters. Christmas and Easter she recognized by carefully selected cards of remembrance. Steamer letters were, therefore, a rigorous part of her social system. Such being the case, the necessity to commemorate her departure was obvious. Accordingly they had all planned to be present. At the last minute, however, it happened that Gilbert was unable to get away; so the party was composed of Mildred and Arthur, accompanied, at his own request, by his nurse. Arthur behaved himself beautifully upon the ship, and received much adulation from admiring ladies. It was in the confusion of leaving the boat that Mildred got separated from the nurse and the child, and when she found herself upon the pier among the laughing and weeping crowd she could not find them. She was not worried, for the nurse, in spite of the fact that she was

wax in Arthur's hands, was a competent girl in routine attendance. It was as the boat seemed about to depart, and the sailors were standing in attitudes by the gang-plank, that Mildred, scanning the crowd, discovered the nurse. The girl hurried toward her—alone!

"Why, where is Arthur!" both exclaimed simultaneously, with the same reply, "I thought he was with you."

"He must be on the boat still!" Mildred exclaimed. "We must go back at once." She started forward as she spoke, the frightened girl following her. She had not lost a minute, yet the thought had shot through her with a fierce sensation of joy. It was scarcely framed in words—just a vision of the bliss of life for a time without Arthur! If he were on the boat, and should be carried to the other side of the ocean with his Aunt Eva! It was unthinkable; Gilbert would be horribly worried. It could not happen, anyway; the child would be sent back in the pilot-boat. She stood a second motionless. A few days, weeks, alone with Gilbert, free from that small, pale interfering presence! There was a sound in her ears. Her blood seemed to beat audibly in her veins. She was roused by an uncouth sound at her side.

"He has been kidnapped," the Irish girl said, and burst into noisy tears. "Sure, the Black Hand has him! I seen two Eyetalians lookin' after him on the pier. We 'll never see him again."

"Nonsense!" Mildred retorted sharply. "He could n't have been stolen from your side in broad daylight." She was walking swiftly through the crowd. "He 's on the boat still. We shall find him."

Mildred had reached the gang-plank by this time; but it was not even necessary for her to explain herself to the haughty official who stood guarding the way; a little boy with dark curls was even then being led weeping down the narrow incline by a pleasant, reassuring steward.

That was all there was to the incident. The tears of nurse and child were soon dried, and the trio returned unharmed to Tilbury; but the day's experience had consequences.

V

THE Flemings' place, which had been a farm in the days before that part of the country became suburban, had a pond at



Drawn by Howard Chandler Christy. Half-tone plate engraved by C. W. Chadwick

"ONE DAY MILDRED SAT WATCHING ARTHUR AS HE PLAYED INTENTLY
WITH A TRAIN OF CARS" (SEE PAGE 422)

the back, which had been made by the damming-up of a little brook. Over this dam in the middle the water flowed in a swift stream, forming a strong current as it reached the edge. Although constituting no danger for the adult navigator, it was unsafe for one not expert with oars. Arthur of course was forbidden to go upon the water at all, although it was his habit to play upon the banks. This seemed to be entirely safe, since his nurse was always with him. Mildred often reflected that although most boys of Arthur's age were scornful of a nurse, he was as dependent upon Carrie as a baby, and he was naturally a careful child, who seemed instinctively to keep out of dangerous situations.

The afternoon after his Aunt Eva's departure, however, it happened that it was Carrie's afternoon out, and Mildred was left in charge of Arthur. He chose to play by the pond, and she sat under a tree close by to read, with, nevertheless, a conscientious eye upon him. A heavy, flat-bottomed scow lay by the little wharf beside a canoe with which she occasionally amused herself and a light rowboat. Arthur, working hard at his play, after the manner of children, had taken one of the loose seats from the boat, and planting it against the scow in imitation of a gang-plank, was playing steamer. It made Mildred a little nervous and she called out to him:

"I should rather you did not play that game, dear." Arthur acted as if he had not heard. She rose and went down to the edge of the pond. "I am afraid you will fall into the water. Then you would get all cold, and you would n't like that."

"Yes, I would," was Arthur's reply, and he kept on walking to and fro upon his improvised gang-plank. Then she spoke more decisively: "I want you to come on the shore right away, Arthur. Your father would n't like you to do that."

Again Arthur acted as if he had not heard.

"Arthur, come here at once."

Arthur did not move. Then Mildred reached out her hand to take him forcibly. Her action was without anger, but it was the action of superior force, and it increased the child's wilfulness. He dodged away from her hand, calling out a familiar

defiance of childhood, "You can't get me; you can't get me." In that moment, looking into Arthur's face, Mildred felt that she hated him.

Suddenly she became aware that his motion had loosened the boat, which had evidently not been moored securely, and, to her horror, she saw it floating out into the stream. It must not get into the current. Once there, it might be drawn over the falls; besides, Arthur might capsize the boat before that. Already he was frightened. After a moment of standing immovably staring at the water, he burst into tears, for, unlike most children, he seemed to receive quickly the sense of danger. In a flash Mildred took in the situation: the canoe paddle and the oars were in the stable; the canoe was useless for rescuing purposes; the rowboat was tied by some amateur hand into a hard knot. There was only one way—to swim. She cast an agonized glance about. There was no one in sight. There was not a minute to lose; already the scow approached the current. She was a fair, though not an expert, swimmer. She pulled off her shoes and waded in. The current had seized the boat now; it began to draw it. She hesitated an infinitesimal instant. The terrified child might easily tax her beyond her resources, making rescue impossible. There was the chance of losing all,—Gilbert, life, happiness. Then horror roused her. Arthur, stamping in his terror, screamed piercingly and rushed to the edge of the boat; he was over in the water, he sank from sight! Aware of no process between that catastrophe and her own action, Mildred swam toward him with all her strength. She reached him as he rose the second time, caught him by his long hair, contrived to get her hand under his chin despite his blind, terrified efforts to fight against her, his vise-like clutch of her arm. In a moment he became heavier. It was hard for her to swim with one arm and support his weight with the other, but the distance was not great. She seemed to become an embodied will. Somehow she reached shallow water, touched bottom, lifted Arthur, now limp, in her arms, and walked the rest of the distance. He was not unconscious, for she felt the instinctive clasp of his arms around her neck. She put him down, detaching his arms with difficulty. She had an indistinct

vision of Gilbert running toward her, then came oblivion.

She came to consciousness out of a nightmare of remorse—the steamer carrying Arthur away, the small figure with outstretched hands pleading with her, the water widening between them, Arthur defying her with his childish malice, and she looking into his eyes and hating him—hating one moment, the next in an agony of terror seeing him struggling in the water, sinking, sinking, while she stood upon the shore, mute, dumb, powerless to save, to atone—she, Mildred, the silent, willing cause of his death, and a whole long lifetime of torment, of remorse, stretching out before her.

She heard Gilbert's voice, her name.

She opened her eyes to see him bending over her.

"Arthur?" she said faintly.

"He is safe," Gilbert answered.

Her eyes closed again, but the tears gathered thickly under the lids. She heard Gilbert's voice again, "My dearest, I 'd no idea you cared so much."

She nodded, wordless. It was true. She did care. Somehow the miracle had happened. There was a bond now binding her to Gilbert's child—the bond of that vision of temptation, the shock of her discovery of her own smothered hatred. She could love him now that she had saved him. She could wait and work against his childish antagonism, now that her own was dead forever.